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Security Force Development in Afghanistan

Learning from Iraq

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Security Force Development in Afghanistan
Learning from Iraq[2]

Before the Committee on Armed Services
Subcommittee on Oversight and Investigations
United States House of Representatives

July 18, 2012

Chairman Wittman, Ranking Member Cooper, and members of the Subcommittee, I am honored to be here today. I have been asked to address the historical experience of building Iraqi security forces and its applicability to current efforts build Afghan security forces as U.S. efforts in that country draw down. I will begin by providing a brief overview of security force development in Iraq, then discuss some of the parallels and differences between the two countries and the two efforts. I will conclude with some thoughts on what the experience in Iraq (and elsewhere) can and cannot teach us for Afghanistan.[3]

Security Force Development in Iraq

The effort to build Iraq's security development went through a number of iterations, although from the very start its goal was to develop forces that could provide for Iraq's security so that coalition forces would not have to. As you will recall, Iraq's Army and defense ministry had to be built from scratch after the Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA) disbanded both on May 23, 2003. The same was true of the intelligence service. However, the fact that the Ministry of Interior (MoI) and its police forces continued to exist, as did the courts and prisons, did not mean that the task of developing those forces and institutions was any easier. Instead, the effort to develop all of

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Iraq's security forces was a tremendously challenging one, forcing coalition advisors to repeatedly rethink their goals and assumptions.

The CPA vision was of a police force in the lead for internal security and a military force geared to defense from external threats. Interestingly, the concept was informed by the then-recent early experience of developing the Afghan National Army. But by spring 2004 it was clear that the Iraqi armed forces would have a domestic role (in the April 2004 Battle of Fallujah the Army's Second Battalion refused to fight). It was equally clear that the under-resourced police, which faced a tremendous shortage both of coalition advisors and of its own leadership capacity (the latter in part because of the de-Ba'athification policy put in place by the CPA), were not up to the task of a lead security role.

Eventually, the goal became to develop the Iraqi Army to both maintain internal security and to provide for external defense. The police was divided between the centralized Federal (formerly National) Police (FP), whose role is counterinsurgency, and the Iraqi Police Service (IPS), who are meant to maintain order locally. Both police and military training were in the hands of coalition military forces from March 2004 onwards, appropriate civilian financial and advisory resources having never materialized in the necessary quantities.

In addition to police and military forces, there exist a number of other armed government organizations, created at various times. In addition to the FP and IPS, the border forces, Facilities Protection Services, and Oil Police report to the MoI. The Iraqi military has air, naval, and counterterrorism structures within it. Agents of the Iraqi Intelligence Service and the Ministry of State for National Security Affairs are also armed. Finally, it is important to note that despite initial efforts to integrate Iraqi security forces from a regional and ethnic standpoint, the Kurdistan Regional Government, and before them the two major Kurdish political parties, has always controlled its own forces.

For the broad array of Ministry of Defense (MoD) and MoI forces, for which we have the best unclassified reporting, coalition personnel had consistent difficulty tracking the numbers of Iraqi forces on the job, reporting well into 2007 on the numbers trained and authorized, rather than present for duty. They knew that these numbers were inaccurate because there were many police on the job who had never received training, and many police and military personnel who had been trained but were no longer on the job, whether because they had died, been injured, quit, or gone AWOL. Tracking equipment also presented similar challenges—coalition forces knew how much had been provided, but not what was in service. This remained a consistent problem.

By 2007 basic training for both police and military units was carried out primarily by Iraqis. Coalition forces were assigned in advisory/transition teams to the Iraqi police and military forces, with whom they ideally ate, slept, and worked. Partnered operations between coalition and Iraqi units were an essential component of the collective training program. Beginning in 2009, U.S. Army Brigade Combat Teams, remissioned as Advised and Assist Brigades, formally took on the lead advisory role. At this time, partnered operations largely ceased. Instead, coalition forces provided key enablers, assisting Iraqi Army units in planning, troop leading procedures, maintenance, sustainment and effective use of tactical intelligence. A substantial advisory system was also in place for the relevant ministries, working to establish effective structures and systems. The transition teams for both military and police forces were predominantly military personnel, because of the continued lack of civilian police advisors. While efforts were made to use military police forces to work with Iraqi police units, this was recognized as an insufficient solution to the problem (though better than previous practice in which policing experience on the part of advisors was rare and accidental when it did happen). International Police Advisors (IPAs) were spread among the teams to provide some police presence. However, there were never enough training teams to cover the breadth of police forces. The police remained the second priority effort.

In all cases, systems and approaches imparted to the Iraqi security forces tended to be heavily based on U.S. (and to a lesser extent other coalition) military concepts, approaches, and doctrines. In some cases, doctrine was directly translated, including for police functions. Automation was also a substantial focus of institutional and enabling development, for instance for personnel and logistics systems.

Advisors and mentors embedded with the Iraqi forces were also responsible for evaluating their progress. Starting in 2005, the system in place for this was the Transition Readiness Assessments (TRAs), which rated units as fully capable, capable, partially capable and forming/incapable. Much of the reporting focused on numbers of personnel and equipment provided and available, and an inadequate number of embedded units to cover the police force meant that these reported numbers remained unreliable. Quantitative measures were supplemented by assessments of capability, based on coalition forces' observation of Iraqi forces in action. Variations on the TRA system, reported as operational readiness assessments, continued to be used through 2008, with increasing focus on capacity for independent action. In fall of 2008, the Iraqi Defense Ministry deployed its own operational readiness assessment system, the Quarterly Readiness and Strategic Review Process. Coalition forces also continued to carry out their own assessments, although these ceased to be reported in an unclassified format starting in 2009. A review of available assessments indicates continuing progress over time as more units are stood up and gain competence, although substantial gaps remained in

areas such as present-for-duty rates, equipment maintenance, and general policing capabilities. Military forces were consistently rated more capable than were police forces, and smaller components of the military, such as the Air Force and Navy, showed steady progress. Very few military or police units were assessed as "fully capable" without reliance on coalition enablers, however. Ministerial capabilities of both MoD and MoI were consistently described as improving, but never overcame substantial gaps in key areas, including basic competence, the fight against corruption, and their ability to assimilate coalition-provided systems. Progress was also consistently insufficient in the development of the justice infrastructure. Intelligence capacity is not publicly assessed, but DoD reports raise concerns about intelligence-sharing well into 2010.

Another key measure of effectiveness could be found in tracking whether or not a given region was ready for transition to Iraqi control. As of January 2009, however, Iraqi security forces were officially in the lead throughout Iraq as a matter of law, due to the expiration of the United Nations Security Council Resolution 1790 and the entry into force of the U.S.-Iraq Security Agreement. Coalition forces remained highly active, however, and performed a range of enabling functions, as well as mentoring and advising. As U.S. forces prepared to depart Iraq, it was clear that far too few forces were meeting the standards for "fully capable." A new goal was therefore developed: "Minimum Essential Capability" (MEC). According to the Defense Department's final publicly available quarterly report to Congress on progress in Iraq, MEC is defined as a state such that "Iraqi security ministries, institutions, and forces can provide internal security and possess minimum foundational capabilities to defend against external threats."[4] MEC was to be reached by the end of 2011, when U.S. forces were to be gone. As of now, it has yet to be attained, primarily because U.S. personnel do not judge Iraqi security forces adequate to defend against external threats.[5]

One more issue should be mentioned in the context of security force development in Iraq, and this is the Sons of Iraq or "Arab Awakening" movement. These terms refer to the decision in late 2006 and early 2007 by the coalition to work with Sunni tribal leaders, and later Sunni insurgent and various local leaders, who offered to provide fighters to the counterinsurgency effort, in exchange for payment and weapons. The Sons of Iraq manned checkpoints and performed other security functions. The decision by Sunni leaders to participate in this program was an important contributor to the reduction of violence in Iraq in 2007 and the program helped shrink the Sunni component of the insurgency dramatically.   A small number of Shi'a were also brought into the SoI. In 2008, Iraq's leaders agreed that 10 percent of the Sons of Iraq would be integrated into the security forces. This figure later doubled, and some integration did take place. However,

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[4] U.S. Department of Defense, "Measuring Stability and Security in Iraq," July 2010.
[5] Statement of the Department of Defense Before the Sub-Committee on National Security, Homeland Defense and Foreign Operations United States House of Representatives, October 12, 2011.

concerns remained that Awakening members might yet turn against the regime. More recently, some Awakening members have been targets of insurgent attacks while a number of movement leaders have been arrested.

Today, coalition forces have withdrawn. DoD retains a small advisory element and assistance to the police has been transferred to the U.S. Department of State. The Iraqi Army remains the most capable force in Iraq and its Air and Naval components are able to maintain their capabilities, even if concerns remain about their ability to maintain all of their equipment. The State Department effort to continue police development has been sharply criticized in both Iraq and the United States, and the police remain underdeveloped, as does the justice sector more broadly. I have no information on the development of the intelligence services.

Iraq and Afghanistan: Similarities and Differences

So, what can the experience in Iraq teach us about Afghanistan? The fact is that although the two countries are fairly dissimilar, security sector development efforts in both have had a number of similarities.

Before turning to the security force assistance effort, let us look first of all at what the two countries have in common. Both are, of course, multi-ethnic, predominantly Muslim countries. Both face challenges of ineffective and weak governance, high levels of corruption and an ineffective justice system. Security forces in both countries continue to suffer from infiltration by insurgents.

But the similarities belie many differences. Basic figures from the CIA's *World Factbook* present a stark contrast. 66 percent of Iraq's population lives in urban areas. Compare this to 23 percent of Afghanistan's (although urbanization is rising). A baby born in Iraq can be expected to live to age 70. One born in Afghanistan can be expected to barely reach 50.   In 2000, 78.1 percent of Iraqis were literate, compared to only 28.1 percent of Afghans.[6] Afghanistan has suffered conflict on its soil for decades, conflict that has devastated the vast majority of the country. Iraq's conflict with Iran, although lengthy and bloody, was limited geographically and ended in 1988. Iraq has a history of functional government and national security forces, even if biased and brutal. Afghanistan has no such history. Iraq's oil resources ensure that the state has the potential for substantial wealth and can afford to sustain its security forces. Afghanistan's economy remains highly dependent on the drug trade, and its mineral wealth will take tremendous time, investment, and effort to exploit, if it is ever to be exploited. It is therefore difficult to imagine an Afghanistan

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[6] Central Intelligence Agency, *World Factbook*, 2012

that is not heavily dependent on foreign assistance, including for support of its security forces. Furthermore, Iraq's literacy rates and wealth mean that its security forces can be relatively sophisticated – Afghanistan's security forces cannot be so. Iraq is an industrialized society. Afghanistan was thrown off that path several decades ago.

A few more things appear to be similar but are, in fact, quite different. Both countries exhibit substantial cleavages among their people, but the Sunni-Shia-Kurd split in Iraq and that country's tribal factions bear little resemblance to the ethnic and tribal divides of Afghanistan, which have fueled civil war for decades. Because of this, the shape of insurgency in the two countries is also very different. Moreover, although religious extremists had a role in the Iraqi insurgency, so did secular forces who sought to redress a power shift. The situation in Afghanistan is, of course, quite different.

Why do these differences matter? After all, there are common approaches to security sector assistance globally, and there should be transferrable best practices. This is true. However, a country's specific situation will determine both what its security needs are and what it is reasonable to expect from its security forces given capabilities and resources. Only some of the best practices identified in working with developed countries facing an external threat will have applicability to a resource-poor, largely illiterate country facing an internal threat, for example.

This said, there are a number of similarities specific to the requirements for security force assistance. Namely, in both Iraq and Afghanistan security force development has been geared to developing local forces to a level where they can maintain security sufficiently to support the departure of coalition forces. In both cases, this was done under challenging conditions, with a complex insurgency underway. Both situations have seen an evolution of goals and approaches, in part because of the development of insurgency, with the force structures that exist being at least in part a product of changing approaches over time. Despite initial goals for small armies focused on external defense in what were expected to be low threat environments, what has emerged in both cases are substantial armed forces with primarily internal security missions in counterinsurgency and counterterrorism contexts.

Other similarities of approach likely owe more to the fact that a U.S.-led coalition has been responsible for security force development in both countries, and that the two efforts proceeded simultaneously, with many of the same individuals involved. As a result, experiences in each theater informed efforts in the other. Specific approaches, from embedded transition teams to training methodologies, have been extremely similar. Even aspects of current efforts to both build

local Afghan forces and to identify paths to reintegration and reconciliation have been informed by the "Sons of Iraq" effort.

The shape of the coalition, its military nature, and the civilian resources and capabilities possessed by its members have also meant that in both Iraq and Afghanistan, despite talk about the primacy of police, military forces have developed more effectively and the development of the military has received better resourcing and more appropriate personnel than has development of police forces. In the meantime, just as hopes to build an army for external defense had to be changed in the face of insurgency, so were plans to develop capable community police, as those forces, too, took on more of a counterinsurgency mission in both countries.

Another important similarity is the challenge that coalition personnel have had assessing local capabilities. Early reporting in Iraq focused, as noted, on personnel trained rather than those present for duty. In both countries, coalition military personnel faced pressure to report progress in their security force assessments, and challenges gathering the data to report accurately. From a quantitative perspective, this means that assessments often reported numbers (of personnel, weapons, etc.) that a unit or organization was meant to have rather than what it did have.[7] Perhaps even more important is the question of identifying the right standard by which to measure capability. How do we define "readiness" or even "minimum essential capability" in an Iraqi or Afghan context? In both countries we have seen coalition doctrine and evaluation standards utilized to less than ideal effect.

What Can We Learn?

Given the many differences between Iraq and Afghanistan, what should ISAF and the United States be taking from the Iraq experience (or, for that matter, from their own or others' experiences in Afghanistan), particularly as they prepare to draw down? A number of key areas can be highlighted, with both positive and negative lessons.

Before I turn to issues related to the building of traditional security forces, I would like to address the related question of helping to develop less regular forces, in part to promote political reconciliation. Specifically, this is the question of whether the Sunni Awakening experience can serve as an example for Afghanistan. Here I urge caution. While I agree that the Sons of Iraq movement was crucial to reducing violence in Iraq, I do not think that a similar approach will have the same effects in Afghanistan. Awakening leaders made a conscious choice to cease actively opposing the Iraqi government and the United States for their own political

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[7] In regards to Iraq, I have discussed this in "No Law and No Order," *Parliamentary Brief*, December 2006. In reference to Afghanistan, it is covered in Kelly, Bensahel, and Oliker.

reasons. Current efforts in Afghanistan, like the Village Stability Operations/Afghan Local Police programs are not comparable. They are focused not on turning insurgents and their supporters, but on spreading stability to rural areas. Further, it is not clear that even if reconciliation and reintegration efforts in Afghanistan, which are geared to convincing insurgents to change sides, were to scale up substantially, that you would have a similar dynamic. There is little sign that the relevant groups are genuinely interested in cooperation or would make reliable partners. In Afghanistan itself, similar efforts by the Soviets and their Afghan allies backfired when groups changed sides multiple times and/or took advantage of the weapons provided to pursue their own interests, including fighting one another. Eventually, these tribal militias became core fighting forces of Afghanistan's lengthy civil war. That experience is worth studying as various Afghan initiatives move forward. Among other things, it suggests that forces thus developed must remain small, defensive, and genuinely tied to formal forces.

Turning now to formal security force development, the first and most important issue I would like to raise is one of standards and evaluation. The very fact that the United States exports its own approaches when it provides assistance means that it evaluates its partners according to its own metrics. The United States is not alone in this—the Soviet experience developing SFA in Afghanistan showed similar proclivities. However, in both Iraq and Afghanistan, local institutions and organizations have had tremendous difficulty (if not disinterest) in taking such approaches on, and there exist real questions regarding their relevance. Computerized systems for logistics and personnel management may be less valuable than paper-based accounting systems in a country with low literacy, limited connectivity and inconsistent electricity. One thing we have seen in both Iraq and Afghanistan is that while local leaders are willing to accept the equipment and training coalition advisors provide, they continue to maintain parallel systems to track information. Those are the systems they will use when foreigners are no longer there.

This is particularly important in the context of drawdown. In Iraq, when it became clear that initial goals could simply not be met by the time of withdrawal, coalition leaders adjusted standards to align with what they thought might actually be possible. Their initial goals had been based on measures reflecting coalition, primarily U.S., views of what forces should look like and do. They were developed with limited Iraqi input and it should not be surprising that they proved both unrealistic and unpalatable to Iraqis. Eventually, U.S. advisors deemed Iraqi security forces capable of meeting the country's internal security needs, albeit under less threatening conditions than had existed a few years before. But the confusion of standards means that what they are actually capable of is not entirely clear.   In Afghanistan, I have heard the phrase "Afghan good-enough" used to suggest that current standards should be lowered, just as in Iraq, the prevalent phrase was "Iraqi good-enough." This is not the right formulation or the right approach. It

suggests that local forces should be able to do what U.S forces can do, only not as well. Rather, both the Afghans and their assistance providers should think about what is actually necessary and possible in Afghanistan, given its security situation and its human and resource capabilities (including the support of the international community). That is not a matter of "good enough," it is a matter of appropriate. U.S. systems are not what Afghanistan needs. Afghan systems, ideally ones developed by Afghans with coalition support, are what Afghanistan needs.

Unfortunately, defining what is appropriate in Afghanistan is a challenge. As the United States found in Iraq, and as both the U.S. and the Soviets found in Afghanistan,[8] few countries will turn down equipment, training, or other assistance when it is offered and few leaders will not want the most modern systems, whether or not they can actually be used effectively. Thus, careful analysis, in consultation with Afghan partners, is needed, coupled with an understanding of how local forces and personnel actually fight, deploy, train, use equipment, and so forth. This can help define options that are, indeed, Afghanistan-appropriate. These options can then inform the effort to assist Afghanistan to develop its own approaches.

In this context, I also think that it is worth examining the benefits that can be derived from embedded trainers. It is my belief that the embedding trainers and partnering forces were used to good effect in Iraq and in Afghanistan. Although embedding did not turn Iraqi security forces into U.S. or coalition-style forces, it did provide an opportunity for U.S. personnel to model best practice behavior. Embedding and partnering also provide a better context for assessments—the closer one is to the host nation unit, the better one can understand how local personnel think about challenges and approaches. Indeed, embedding can help assistance providers better understand and measure what locally appropriate approaches to a problem might be. If this is then integrated into the development of assistance, it may be possible to implement systems that make more sense for the local environment.

The question of institution-building and corruption is also a crucial one in this regard. There is broad agreement that institution-building is key to developing effective security forces. There is also broad agreement that building effective institutions in countries plagued by conflict and corruption is a tremendous challenge. The trick here, I think, is accepting that truly overcoming corruption will take not only time, but genuine will on the part of local governments. Assistance cannot overcome disinterest, and indeed opposition, on the part of those in charge who benefit from the status quo. Part of determining what is Afghan-appropriate is accepting that some

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[8] For more on the Soviet experience building SFA in Afghanistan, see Olga Oliker, *Building Afghanistan's Security Forces in Wartime: The Soviet Experience*, (Santa Monica, RAND, 2011)

things will simply take generations, while others may be accomplished through policy and incentives.

Another important lesson of recent experiences in Afghanistan and Iraq lies in the area of police development and, more broadly, the justice sector overall. Militaries are not effective means of building the sorts of police forces that post conflict societies want and need. However, the United States and most of its allies lack the capacity to deploy substantial numbers of police trainers to develop police in their own image. Nor, as the military experience shows, is that necessarily the right approach. Today, as withdrawal looms, the United States and its partners should work with the Afghans to define what sort of police development can be realistically envisioned for Afghanistan, and devote resources and assistance to developing that into the future. The same holds true for the justice sector, without which no law and order can develop. This is a long-term proposition, and not one that can be resolved before forces are withdrawn.

Early efforts to build security forces in both Iraq and Afghanistan were limited and proved woefully inadequate. Those elements of the US government responsible for foreign security force development in 2001, the State Department in the case of police and the Special Operations community in the case of foreign militaries, were simply not scalable to the degree needed to build largely from scratch the security forces of two, or even one medium sized state. Nowhere in the US government was there the capacity or the expertise needed to build foreign security forces on the scale needed in either of these countries. Over time, as efforts in both countries scaled up, capabilities were developed, although as noted, substantial gaps remained in regards to police development. It will be important, as the U.S. commitments in Iraq and Afghanistan wind down, that the expertise to conduct security force development on this scale now developed not be lost, that ways be found to fill the capability gaps that remain (such as for police development), and that an expandable capacity be retained somewhere in the US national security establishment, one capable of rapidly surging to fill such requirements should the need one day re-arise.

Finally, one of the key differences between Iraq and Afghanistan highlighted above is one of native resources. As I already noted, Iraq's energy wealth means that Iraq will be able to sustain its own forces. Afghanistan quite simply cannot afford the security forces it needs, even at a very minimal level. This means that if Afghanistan is to continue to maintain and develop its security forces, it will need continuing financial and security aid. Another lesson from the Soviet experience: Soviet advisors had a very low opinion of their Afghan counterparts. Many were convinced (as was the Afghan leadership) that Najibullah's government and forces would collapse soon after Soviet forces withdrew. In fact, they lasted until Soviet aid stopped, with the collapse of the USSR. There is reason to think that, despite the substantial concerns about the

quality and capability of Afghan security forces today, with continued resourcing, they are sufficient to at least continue to combat the present threat. The question is whether or not they will have that resourcing. The international community has pledged such aid, but pledges have to be met. Recent history in both Iraq and Afghanistan shows that what is delivered often falls substantially short of what is pledged.

Again, thank you for the opportunity to appear before you today. I look forward to your questions.